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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the influence of Lilian G. Katz on the dissemination of knowledge in early childhood education. Communication theory, women's learning, and the role of the "invisible mentor" are presented as a model for understanding the impact of Katz's perspectives on the profession. The paper considers two major elements in presenting this model: (1) communication, which involves both information distribution and query/examination and requires dissemination; and (2) gender and culture, which influence how communication is "absorbed." (Author)

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# Invisible Mentor: Communication Theory and Lilian Katz

Karen L. Peterson


## Abstract

This paper describes the influence of Lilian G. Katz on the dissemination of knowledge in early childhood education. Communication theory, women's learning, and the role of the "invisible mentor" are presented as a model for understanding the impact of her perspectives on the profession. Two major elements are considered in presenting this model: (1) communication, which involves both information distribution and query/examination and requires dissemination; and (2) gender and culture, which influence how communication is "absorbed."


This brief paper proposes the existence of a "new" type of mentor, one who might be labeled "invisible." As a mentor needs a "mentee," the mentee in this model is described as an "absorbent learner." Lastly, it is proposed that the primary connection between individuals takes place through communication. Not only is the process of communication considered essential but, in this case, the content of the communications as well.

The thought processes behind this proposition are built on "things learned" over several years of watching and learning from Lilian G. Katz. The idea of the "invisible mentor" is rooted in the following assumptions: Lilian Katz is unique as a "leader" in early childhood; a majority of the professionals in early childhood are women and as women are strongly influenced by the context in which they learn and grow professionally. Finally, one's understanding and knowing about oneself and young children is individually constructed, subjective, and constantly evolving.

## The Leader Role

Without question, Lilian Katz is a leader in the field of early childhood education. Any number of variables (e.g., ability to organize and rally the troops) may define leadership. It is, however, more than a list of qualities and skills. Leadership involves personal performance—having integrity in all things, understanding the servanthood of leadership, and engaging in the practice of equity (DePree, 1992). Leadership is best demonstrated by one who can clearly articulate priorities, establish a tone or "feel" in an organization or profession, and consistently think and communicate at a level just above where the majority of people function.

Given such characteristics and capabilities, there remains a quality (a disposition perhaps) (Katz & Raths, 1985) that is unique in the relationship between Lilian Katz and the early childhood community. Lilian Katz's relationship with the early childhood community is multifaceted. She is a friend, colleague, plenary speaker and "provocateur," author, scholar, and, for thousands, one who is sought after for learning and priority identification. For many, it is her capability to listen and to

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conduct research, explain and teach, and communicate in a perspective of one in a leadership role that makes her unique. It is her commitment to the "life of the mind" (Katz & Chard, 1989) and profound respect for childhood that draws such admiration and esteem.

## The Following

What is "it" that makes for such strong allegiance to the unofficial Lilian Katz professional admiration society? For many of us, membership in the society is seen in our professional behavior (e.g., looking at the National Association for the Education of Young Children annual conferences to see when Lilian is going to speak and setting the evening schedule around the event(s); citing her stories, ideas, and publications when we make presentations to others; elbowing a roommate at a conference when she's been seen getting into the elevator and saying, "*She's* right over there! This is so cool!").

Many of us are members of "the society" because Lilian Katz facilitates our own thinking and, ultimately, our formation of understanding. She demonstrates intellectual inquiry matched with capability that enables her to consistently maintain communication with a broad array of individuals; she is always considerate of the "hidden" intelligence of those in the "audience." In brief, being a "beneficiary" learner of Lilian Katz is a phenomenological experience embedded in the constructivist perspective of one's life history, gender, and professional training. The most significant factor of such learning is to come to understand the impact of communication.

## Communication Theory and Knowing

Communication is the essential vehicle through which learning occurs for most of us in professional settings. Communication studies and theory have multiple interpretations from classic to modern, broad to specific. For this paper, we will consider the traditional dissemination perspective on communication.

Traditional communication theory proposes that communication involves the construction of meaning from others through the exchange of symbolic forms/print/writing, rhetoric, nonverbal behavior, and so on. It is absolutely necessary for communications to be extended outward or exchanged (dissemination). Dissemination takes place through communication and involves both information distribution and query/examination.

The dissemination of information can be mediated (others can change, interpret, elect to read, ignore, or critique), and thus this form of communication is considered public because it is generally unidirectional. Interpersonal dissemination is bi- or multidirectional (involving active, "real-time" dialogue, discussion, or allowing for feedback) and is depicted as transactive and dynamic. In both cases, the acquisition of information and subsequent understanding by the "audience" is dependent on multiple factors such as situation; receptivity; and perceived role of communication, gender, age, and familiarity with the subject matter.

Learning through communication takes place when there is engagement with the intended understanding. Following a Vygotsky (1978) tangent, understanding is inherently embedded in culture, and part of one's culture is one's gender. Much of the research over the past 30 years on how learning takes place has focused on issues of gender. Inherent in these perspectives is the supposition that women learn differently from men and that communication is a vital part of women's learning experiences. Communicating information and understanding the position (or role) of the individual being communicated with are the essential elements in determining if an individual "knows." Knowing involves identification of three elements: gender, culture, and the capabilities of the communicator via dissemination.

One of the more familiar models for understanding the triadic interplay among gender, culture, and communication comes from Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). Belenky et al. propose five types of learning or "knowing." These typologies reflect the processes and procedures women use to come to understand both the concrete and the abstract. Women "come to know" through silence (listening without active interaction), received knowledge (authorities are the "ones" who know), subjective knowledge (understanding comes from highly personal interpretations and value "filters"), proce-

dural knowledge (knowing comes from fitting pieces together in logical and rational ways), and, finally, constructed knowledge (intuitive "hunches" are blended with rational—and complex—thinking) (York, 1995). In each of these typologies, the key is understanding how women "tie together the pieces of communication from the 'outside.'" All of the knowledge "types" advocate for understanding that women's learning is (1) connected to a perceived relationship with other(s); (2) reflective of a multivariable approach to an issue, problem definition, and solution generation; and (3) dependent on learning within a specific context (Tarule, 1988).

One assumption often made by proponents of learning types is that knowledge is acquired when active dialogue takes place between individuals with both similar and slightly varying intellectual perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978). Granted, there is a multitude of research that supports this view, as does the work of Belenky et al. (1986) and Hayes and Flannery (2000). In addition to these more traditional typologies, I propose another "type" of knowledge construction typical among women in the field of early childhood, that of the "absorbent learner."

## The Absorbent Learner

An "absorbent learner" is one who holds a strong understanding of the basic tenets of how people (children) grow, change, and are affected by the interactions of others, understand the world, learn, and so forth. The "absorbent learner" listens, discusses, verifies, explains, and uses multiple strategies and styles to come to know but ultimately self-constructs understanding most effectively *with* the assistance of a "mentor."

For the absorbent learner, most of the "pieces" of knowing are present. More often than not, there are billions of pieces (too many vs. not enough), and absorbent knowing requires an external "guide" to help integrate, edit, dispose of, reorganize, and creatively connect the pieces. The person who makes the connections is in an "external role" (i.e., external to the dialogue that takes place between the absorbent learner and the ideas of the "guide"). Such a guide then is often only directly contacted: an invisible mentor. This type of mentor is heard and experienced by an absorbent learner, but only on rare occasions does the "absorbent" directly "dialogue" with the "mentor." The typology of an absorbent learner is one of intellectual activity without direct interaction, conversation, or contact.

## What Makes for an Invisible Mentor?

Invisible mentors are not "super-human" persuaders or orators, nor are they icons with intractable wisdom. An invisible mentor has the capacity and capability (albeit a gift) to see just above the "tree top" and the ability and commitment to come "back down" and tell many below what can be seen. In early childhood, an invisible mentor always has more than one "voice" (or perspective). She may talk to professional adults about what children might optimally do, while simultaneously considering the experience from the child's perspective and the experience of those unfamiliar with the professional values of early childhood. Given the significant overabundance of ideas, values, lesson plans, free materials, new curriculum guides, training videos, and other resources that inundate the early childhood professional, the invisible mentor has the instinctive capability to sort out the valuable from the superfluous.

## The Gifts

Lilian Katz is the "invisible mentor" for many of us in early childhood, from the classroom assistant teacher to the university professor. Inherent to the concept of the "invisible mentor" are qualities of leadership, exceptional intellect, respect, extraordinary perception, and an affinity for childhood. In considering the impact of Dr. Katz as an invisible mentor, the case might be made for examining every work and every speech to look for the common threads. I propose that there are three overlapping *qualities* found in every act of dissemination and three intersecting *processes* that enable the qualities to "fit together."

In each act of dissemination, I find the *qualities* of *dignity* (i.e., respect for the child, admiration for the work of teaching); *taking the long-term view* (i.e., childhood is about the quality of life *now* and in the future); and *depth of substance* (i.e., children's minds are not for filling with cuteness, trivial fun, and inaccurate information; teaching is not a casual

pursuit, and not everyone should teach). These qualities represent the context for each work and idea, and it is what we seek to know from her.

The *processes* (there are three) represent *how* these qualities are joined. The processes by which Katz's invisible mentor functions include *validity* (i.e., what she proposes is real, true, and germane—our sense of what is right is clarified and affirmed); *relevance* (i.e., the best mix of theory, practice, and reflection—our minds are not wasted when we listen); and, finally, *resilience* (i.e., perseverance, intuition, and humor—our minds have new connections that are forever changed). These processes are inner-linked with the qualities and represent the essence of what we gain from this "invisible mentor." The gift has been (and will continue to be) having the opportunity to "absorb" the thinking of Lilian Katz.

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